

YMWCA OF NEWARK AND VICINITY

A SHORT HISTORY

Comparatively few institutions in Newark can boast of serving the area for more than 100 continuous years. The YMWCA of Newark is one that can do so.

The secret of the Y's successful existence and growth in 115 years, is that, as the face of Newark changed, so did the Y, thus offering a vital service in the growth and development of the area it serves.

Newarkers are all familiar with the present day Y headquarters at 600 Broad Street where a full range of activities for every member of the family is conducted, in addition to programs which cater to the needs of the business community.

The "new" Y was built in 1954 at the same time the YW and the YMCA merged into one. It's been there long enough now that people tend to forget it wasn't always there. A lot of history preceded the move to its location.

"The YWCA was the first to appear on the Newark scene in 1871 founded to promote "the spiritual, moral, mental and temporal welfare of women, especially young women who are dependent upon their own exertion for support."

The YMCA followed in 1881, though attempts to start one had been made earlier. Its ideal was "To improve the spiritual, intellectual and social condition of young men."

The Newark of the late 1800's is hard to visualize in 1994. Its population was about 136,000 and it was a compact and relatively isolated community. Electricity and the telephone, though existent, were not in wide use, and there were no cars, movies, radio or television. The street were cobblestoned, and boat clubs lined the Passaic River. Everyone knew each other, everyone knew who owned the carriages passing them as they walked along the streets.

It was in this society that the YWCA first answered a need for women in the community. Women who had to seek their own livelihood were rare in the Victorian era, for they either

married, or, if they stayed single, were provided for by their families. Those who had neither option had hard going to find a means to support themselves so the YW was a welcome addition to the community.

The YW opened shop in East Park Street, then moved to 50 Atlantic Street where 23 young women were given the comforts of home, including lodging, meals and the attendance of a woman physician, for \$3.00 a week.

An employment bureau for needle workers "seeking honest toil" was created in 1873, the same year the organization was incorporated, and the association again moved, this time 10 315 Mulberry Street. They next acquired property at Court and Shipman Streets in 1875.

At this time, the YW formed a flower mission, so named because among its activities was distributing flowers to the sick either at hospitals or in their homes. It later was absorbed by an auxiliary society of the YW which devoted much of its time looking after the needs of women suffering from incurable diseases. Then, in 1891, the YW established a Home for Women with Incurable Diseases at the Court Street location. Two years later, a separate building was erected for women so afflicted.

Free educational classes were started by the YW in 1885 with a few desks and a typewriter, and courses in sewing were made available which were conducted at a building at 12-14 East Park Street. The Court Street building was now used as a boarding home. The YW bought property at 562 Broad Street in 1907 and a second boarding house was opened at 105 Mt. Pleasant Avenue. Their final move, before merging with the YM in 1954 was to 53 Washington Street in 1913, now occupied by Rutgers University.

A branch for black women was organized in 1921 on Jones Street, and at the same time a program for foreign-born women was begun.

Through the years, as women entered more diversified fields, courses were offered in public speaking, beauty culture, business skills, and courses that carried graduate credits at

Columbia University.

Where the YWCA started out with 23 women in its first home, the YMCA in its second year of existence reported activities among 23,000 boys and young men.

In 1882 a building was purchased on Clinton Street and a year later a gymnasium was added. This building served the organization until moving to its present location.

While at its Halsey Street location, the YM provided the origin of the Boy Scouts of Newark, and was instrumental in the founding of the Ironbound Community and Industrial Service.

Kamp Kiamesha in Newton, was opened by the YM in 1909 and during the World War I years, military training was added to the program to "instill into the hearts and minds of the boys the spirit of patriotism and service."

A branch for black men and boys was opened in 1928 in rented rooms at 145 West Market Street, which was moved in 1931 to new headquarters at 153 Court Street.

Both the Court and the Jones Street Y's operated independently until the merger of the YM and the YW. Then both groups formed the Southwest Y at the Jones Street location.

Other branches and camps cropped up as the city started sprawling. A North End Community Boys' Work branch was operating in the early 1900's and in 1922 branches were extended to Roseville and Vailsburg. South Branch was active in the community in the 30's and 40's. Suburban branches were located in Irvington and Belleville. The West Hudson branch in Kearny, and the Y Girls' Center in the Clinton Hill section of Newark are serving their areas today.

The camping services of the Y also were enlarged with the acquisition of Camps MacDonalds and Linwood in Branchville in 1959, and a day camp, Camp Dawson, in Towaco in 1955.

Both the YM and the YW were affected by the changes wrought by World War II. The

YM organized three local USO Centers and in addition the YM opened its facilities, recreation, meals medical examinations, and religious services. The YW gave special attention to women in war work, by training them to keep fit, and providing recreation for them.

After the war, it became apparent that a new Y was necessary to meet the needs of the growing metropolis. Newark's population had doubled since the Halsey Street Y had been built and through hard use, the building was worn out.

Charles B Neibling, president of the Newark YMCA at the time, in a plea for new YMCA building, stated the swimming pool in the Halsey Street Y looked like "an oversized bathtub" and that much of the funds that should go into programming had to be used for recurring repairs.

The building site at Broad and Rector Streets, where the Y now stands, was acquired six years before the building fund was initiated in 1946. The campaign was resumed again in 1951 and ground was broken for the building the following year.

While the Y under construction, the boards and members of the YM and YW, in separate balloting, voted to merge the two organization into the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Association of Newark and Vicinity. The merger became effective in 1954.

The new merged organization did not move into its new headquarters immediately, for building was halted due to financial worries. So the separate organizations continued to function in their old buildings until the Y finally opened in 1956.

The spanking new facility boasted a 75 x 25 foot swimming pool with underwater lighting and AAU championships were held there soon after the opening. Fully equipped gymnasiums were supplemented with massage tables, steam cabinets, exercise rooms, showers and lockers. Other features included meeting rooms, lounges, and offices for the administrative staff of the Y. Its price tag of \$3,300,000 was a lot of money in the 50's but now would be considered a bargain.

With the merger of the YM and the YW, a new style of programming developed involving the entire family. Family memberships were offered and family camping was encouraged at the Y camps in Sussex County.

Robert Wilson, Jr., the first Black General Executive Director, came to Newark in 1970 and under his direction, the scope of the Y increased even more.

At the outset, his goal was to bring inner-city youth and families into a closer relationship with the YMWCA.

"There must be effective dialogue with the community and that's one of my job here in Newark," he said at the time of his appointment.

He immediately set about informing the inner city areas of Newark of what programs offered at the Y could benefit them.

Teenage clubs were formed and contemporary problems came into focus through several programs, such as the Model United Nations and the Youth and Government for teenagers, and the International Management Council for adults.

Bi-lingual programs were added to aid the growing Hispanic community. Through funding from Model Cities and the High Impact Anti-Crime Program, juvenile offenders were sent to summer programs and Outward Bound camps under Y sponsorship, a program described as an educational experience in self-discovery.

Other organizations also trying to serve the community received an assist from the Y when it opened its doors to them by supplying them with meeting space at little or not charge so they could continue their work. National, state and county and local groups have met there for years.

In addition, the Y reached out and helped families by opening day care centers for toddlers, a center for children with learning difficulties, juvenile programs, and housing youths enrolled in the Division of Youth and Family Services.

In the 80's, however, the City of Newark suffered as most major cities from demographic changes and shifts in populations. Many businesses left the city as well as the middle class. The Newark began to suffer as a result of these changes. Additionally, management decisions and practices, economic conditions and other societal problems led to a slow and steady decline of the YMWCA. Membership declined, programs disappeared, maintenance suffered and the Y was faced with a group of social undesirable that it was unable to effectively serve. By 1990, the Y had operating losses of over three million dollars, very little programming and little credibility in the community.

In December of 1991, faced with the prospect of closing its doors, a new management team was brought in by the National YMCA, New York, Management Resource Center and the Board of Directors to develop a Recovery Plan.

The Management Team quickly put together a strategy that entailed the following for 1992:

1. Closing down all unprofitable Centers and Camps.
2. Negotiating plans with the governmental officials to abate Health and Code violations.
3. Making the facilities clean and safe.
4. Regaining the support of the United Way.
5. Reopening the emergency Shelter floor and expanding the program.
6. Filing for protection under Bankruptcy Codes.
7. Developing Y programs and returning to the basics.

In 1992, the Y succeeded in achieving the goals set forth in the Recovery Plan. There were many major achievements including:

- Renovating the 11th & 12th Floors
- 300% membership increase

- Renovated Nautilus and Fitness Center
- Restaurant opening
- New program thrust
- Restoration of funding by United Way and other foundations.
- Rededication of the "Y" and "Turning on the Light"

Most importantly, the Y was able to rekindle hope and a sense of pride. In order to accomplish its goals, it was necessary to file for protection under Bankruptcy Codes.

The association has come a long way the past two years, however, there is still a long way to go. In 1993, a Strategic Plan was developed that will provide the direction of the Newark YMWCA as it prepares for the year 2000 and beyond.